



Urban Residents Update

Summer 2008

The Urban Residents of the Episcopal Diocese of Massachusetts are newly ordained clergy placed into urban parishes for three years in order to accomplish two objectives. First, the residents learn how to handle the challenges and complexities of urban ministry so that they may become more resourceful, inventive, and faithful leaders for the Diocese. Secondly, urban parishes reap the benefits of working with clergy that bring new life, energy, and creativity to their ministry.

New Urban Resident Joins Parishes in Lowell

On July 1st, a new face greeted congregations at St. Anne's and St. John's Episcopal Churches in Lowell, MA.

The Rev. Chitral de Mel is working with both parishes as the newest Urban Resident for the Episcopal Diocese of Massachusetts. St. Anne's and St. John's developed a partnership this year under the leadership of the Rev. Ramon I. Aymerich, who is the rector of St. Anne's and priest-in-charge at St. John's. The hope is that their new Urban Resident will be able to assist Aymerich with liturgical responsibilities, congregational development, and youth ministry. With both parishes small in size and unable to afford another clergy person within the constraints of their budgets, the presence of de Mel through the Urban Residents program comes as a blessing as they work towards growing and strengthening their congregations.

Rev. de Mel has many ideas about what he would like to accomplish as an Urban Resident. First, he said he would like to make St. John's and St. Anne's, "more relevant to the community" by strengthening existing relationships with local organizations as well as building new ones. Secondly, he hopes to welcome new members from diverse backgrounds into the congregations. Lowell has the second highest population of Cambodian immigrants in the country with estimates ranging from 25,000-30,000 people.* As the former Asian Missioner at Grace Episcopal Church in Lawrence, de Mel plans to use his experiences with immigrants to draw in new parishioners from this and other populations. Finally, de Mel wants to strengthen connections between the parishes and area youth organizations to build the youth ministry program and help combat the issue of gang violence. The Massachusetts Department of Public Safety reports that at least seven gangs in Massachusetts recruit members from Lowell, resulting in violence that affects the city's young people. It is a problem that has plagued the city for many years, and de Mel hopes that by working with local agencies such as the Anti-Gang Task Force, St. Anne's and St. John's can become safe places for Lowell's youth to grow in heart, mind and spirit.

When asked why he wanted to become an Urban Resident, de Mel said, "It provides a unique opportunity to share liturgical responsibilities, do congregational development, community outreach...I can engage in all things." He is not only looking forward to using his past experiences to grow the congregation, but also wants to grow in his own formation. He embraces the chance to learn from his new mentor, the Rev. Ramon I. Aymerich, and is ready to strengthen his ministry under the guidance of a rector who has had much experience working in urban congregations.

A native of Sri Lanka, de Mel spent his early years working as a human rights lawyer in his home country until he came to the United States in 1989. He enrolled in Episcopal Divinity School and received his Master of Divinity degree in 1996. From there, he assisted immigrants with legal issues while on staff at the Refugee Immigration Ministry and founded his own organization, the Sri Lanka Association of New England. Ordained in 2005, de Mel served as the priest-in-residence at St. Mary's in Dorchester until 2007 and is now the first Urban Resident to serve St. Anne's and St. John's.

With a demonstrated commitment to community and a passion for urban issues, Rev. Chitral de Mel brings many skills and talents to his new role as Urban Resident for the parishes in Lowell. He is ready to lead the parishioners of St. Anne's and St. John's to a new level of congregational and spiritual growth. Rev. de Mel is a welcome addition to the parish families and they are looking forward to the positive change he will bring to their community over the next three years.

* Presto, Suzanne "Cambodian Immigrants Make Impact on City in US Northeast" (<http://www.voanews.com/english/archive/2005-05/2005-05-04-voa72.cfm>) 4 May 2005.



The Rev. Ramon I. Aymerich stands with new Urban Resident, the Rev. Chitral de Mel, de Mel's wife Vyronni, and daughter Chirusha.

Agents of Change:

The Rev. Daniel Velez-Rivera and BANA Youth Hear Call to Make a Difference

A new generation of leaders from three very different places has joined forces to build a new America.

Senior high youth from Grace Church in Salem, St. Stephen's in Lynn, and St. Andrew's in Marblehead have been meeting together for the past year as a part of a new youth group called BANA, which stands for Building a New America. The teens come together once a month to discuss the "-isms" that plague their communities, including racism, sexism, and classism. It is also an opportunity to discover their own personal and spiritual identities as well as talk about the importance of social justice and social action.

The group originally started as a partnership between the Lynn and Marblehead parishes. The purpose was to enrich the students' lives by giving them the opportunity to interact with other young people from different communities – different in race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. According to the Rev. Daniel Velez-Rivera, Urban Resident at Grace Church in Salem, "The group discovered that I had no programmatic funding for the Hispanic ministry and outreach work that I do at Grace Church." Velez-Rivera has been actively building a Hispanic ministry in Salem since beginning his service as an Urban Resident in 2006. In order to help support Velez-Rivera's work, BANA invited the Hispanic youth from Grace Church to join them. There are currently six teens from Salem now involved with the youth from Lynn and Marblehead.

BANA has been quick to begin its mission towards social change. Last year, the group traveled to upstate New York to visit with and learn from migrant communities. This year, from June 21st through June 28th, the group traveled to Biloxi, Mississippi to rebuild areas left devastated by Hurricane Katrina. They worked together with area teens from Biloxi to rebuild homes, serve meals, and work on other projects as needed. Much was done in order to prepare for this venture. In order to offset the cost of the trip, BANA held a fundraiser that combined the teens' artistic talents with food, music and fun. The group sold tickets to an art exhibit featuring pieces created by BANA youth and raffled items such as tickets to a Red Sox game. In total, the event raised nearly \$4,000 to be used for the trip.

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In addition to fundraising and other more practical preparations, the youth engaged in personal and spiritual journeys over the past four months as they prepared for their trip to Biloxi. According to Velez-Rivera, the teens were pushed to look inside themselves to discover their own identities. "They have been asking themselves questions such as why do I come to BANA? Why do I want to help and will what I do make a difference? Why is it important to be aware of differences in other people?" The hope is that by answering these questions and sharing their responses with one another in a safe environment, the youth will strengthen their individual identities and become closer with each other as they grow in the common call of social justice. Says one youth from St. Stephen's in Lynn, "Each meeting we find ourselves talking about why we are here and what is important about this group. Personally, it's more than words can even begin to describe. Whenever I feel, see or hear something passionate at a meeting or really understand someone else's words my heart starts to pitter-patter...The feeling of not just talking about making a difference but being the difference is what drives me."

When asked what he hoped the BANA youth would get out of this mission trip, Velez-Rivera chuckled and said, "That's up to the Holy Spirit!" For many of the teens, this was not only their first mission trip, but also their first time on a plane, and for some, their first time leaving Massachusetts. "A lot can happen on a trip like this that can transform someone's whole life. The experience is very unique to each person," said Velez-Rivera. Another BANA youth from Grace Church in Salem eloquently summarized the group's hopes for the Biloxi trip by saying, "We will be meeting with another group of teens that have the same goals and ambitions. Together we will help build homes for the many families who have not yet settled from the destruction. This is just one of the steps we will take toward making a change...I think I speak for us all when I say that I hope it inspires you to make a difference."

Let the rebuilding begin.



A member of BANA shows off artwork put on display at their mission trip fundraiser.

Equipped to Minister

The Rev. Matthew Stewart Reflects on Urban Residency and Preparation for New Call

On Sunday, June 29th, the Rev. Matthew Stewart ended his three year service as an Urban Resident at St. Stephen's in Lynn and will move on to become priest-in-charge of the newly combined Episcopal churches in Fall River starting in mid-summer.

While reflecting on his time at St. Stephen's, Stewart said that his years as an Urban Resident have taught him to be ready for anything. "In the 1950s," he said, "St. Stephen's had a couple thousand members. While it is now much smaller, it still has a corporate size mentality. The culture around here is very busy." Stewart assisted the Rev. Jane Gould and other parish leaders with almost every facet of parish life,

from worship to outreach ministry to helping with the constant array of events going on at the parish. He also said that he faced a lot of surprises along the way. "God does great things in the city, but I learned that if you think you know what they are, you're wrong!" The hustle-and-bustle nature of his time as an Urban Resident has prepared Stewart to handle anything that comes his way as the new priest-in-charge in Fall River.

Stewart said that the cities of Lynn and Fall River have much in common. "They have a mix of urban vitality with a small town feel – people tend to know each other in these communities." He describes the populations of both cities as "people who are level-headed and practical, but at the same time very hopeful for the future." Stewart was introduced to many people and community organizations in Fall River through his former parishioners in Lynn. "I was already networked, in a way!" he said, and was grateful to have ties to both cities.

While juggling the many responsibilities required of an Urban Resident, Stewart spent much of his time over the past three years working with young adults. One young adult ministry group consists of students from nearby Gordon College, many of whom are gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgendered and were looking for a safe place to worship. The group had a common interest in the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), and organized a conference about the MDGs with students from other Christian denominations. "It was a great way to show how young people from both liberal and conservative points of view can come together and focus on a common purpose," said Stewart.

Another group consists of a population that is often neglected when thinking about young adults – single mothers. "Most of the time, when we talk about young adults, we think of students in their early 20s who are still in or just recently graduated from college," said Stewart. "But there is a large contingent of young people in Lynn for whom college is not an option." The single mothers meet once a month to discuss leadership and spirituality while also making time for fellowship. "When you're working a full time job and taking care of a child, there isn't much time to spend on yourself," said Stewart. "This is a chance for them to get closer to God and each other, and also to have some fun!"

Stewart said he feels blessed to have had the opportunity to be an Urban Resident in Lynn and is excited to take his experiences and apply them to his ministry in Fall River. His new parishioners in Fall River are happy to have him as well. Said Stewart of his new congregation, "It's clear that everyone is ready to come together to do God's work."



The Rev. Matthew Stewart spends time with parishioners at St. Stephen's in Lynn.